

Swamped!

By Judy Vernon

Last summer, four of us set out on a fishing trip on the Chesapeake Bay. Only two of us came back. Here's what happened.

On July 1, my son George called me to see if I wanted to go fishing with him and his boss, Gus. George had been wanting to buy a boat, and Gus was interested in selling his. This would be a good opportunity to check out the boat and have some fun at the same time.

We met not far from the boat ramp. Gus had brought along his 9-year-old grandson Mike. It was Mike's first time going fishing on the boat, and he was very excited. The boat was a 16-foot tri-hull, with a 60 hp outboard motor. It was a bass-boat design with a low freeboard.

Gus made Mike put on a life jacket (the zip-up kind). The jacket was an adult size and too big for Mike. He complained it was uncomfortable and it was too hot to wear, but Gus made him keep it on anyway. The rest of the life jackets were stowed in a box onboard, where they stayed.

As we left the dock, George was sitting on a platform in the bow of the boat, facing the rear. Mike was sitting on the floor in the middle of the boat, by the box containing life jackets and other equipment and the ice chest. Gus and I were on a bench near the rear of the boat. I was on the left side, and Gus was on the right, driving the boat.

Once out in the bay, we stopped and cast our lines. I caught a fish, but that was the only one caught at that spot. We decided to move to a better spot for fishing.

As we approached the new spot, I noticed two large boats coming toward us at high speed. When they passed on both sides of us, we saw their wakes headed for us.

George was hit square in the back with the first wave of the wake. Suddenly, water in the boat was calf high. The box of equipment and the cooler were floating. Mike was mad about getting wet and asked his grandfather how that happened. Gus told him it wasn't our fault; it was the fault of the boats that passed.

Gus was concerned that the water didn't seem to be draining out the back the way it should. He put the boat in neutral and went to the rear of the boat to check the plug. As soon as he did, the second wave of the wake hit us and washed over the back of the boat. Mike ran to George. George looked at me. In that instant, we knew the boat was going to sink. In less than 10 seconds, we were in the water.

George handed Mike to his grandfather, and we started swimming toward the floating box that contained the life jackets. George opened the box and threw me an orange one. He handed Gus a vest like mine, but Gus didn't want that one. He wanted the zip-up type like Mike was wearing. George found one of those for Gus, threw it to him, and Gus put it on. Then George got an orange one for himself.

As soon as we got out the life jackets, the box sank. I struggled to put on my vest. Putting a life vest on in the water is not easy. Now we were floating in the water, with Gus holding onto Mike.

We saw a buoy nearby and tried to swim toward it, but the current was taking us in the opposite direction. I found out later that hanging onto a buoy wouldn't have been a good idea anyway, because the part in the water is usually covered with barnacles, which can cut your arms or legs to shreds.

The current separated Gus and Mike from George and me, but we could still see each other, and we could see the shore. It was about four or five miles away, and it seemed the current was carrying us toward it. We decided to drift with the current and let it help us swim for shore.

George noticed something tangled in my life vest. It was a piece of tubing from the box. We used the tubing to tie us together. Then George said, "O.K., Mom, swim."

Now, I can swim two or three lengths of a pool, but I can't swim for miles in choppy bay water. After I swam a few strokes, George asked me to stop, because I was causing resistance for him. So I decided just to roll over and float to make myself lighter for him to pull. We could see and hear Gus, who, like us, was calling for help. But there was no

one near to hear us. There was nothing we could do except drift. Flares and all other distress items went down with the boat. When a boat would pass far away, we would all yell. Soon, we could hear Gus yell, but couldn't see him.

At one point, George told me he could swim to shore if I would be O.K. in the water by myself. I begged and pleaded with him not to leave me alone. So we stayed together, drifting and swimming. I was tied to him and floating on my back. The waves started picking up and were washing over my face. Twice while we were in the water, George asked me if I was O.K. Twice I told him no, so he stopped swimming and came back to me to push me up out of the water so I could breathe.


After about three hours of drifting in the water, George could make out a fishing pier on shore. We both started yelling. Someone on the pier heard us. Soon, we saw an ambulance show up on the beach. But our ordeal wasn't over yet.

A jet ski was sent out to pick us up. Since I am 52 years old and not in the best shape, I couldn't get on the ski from the water. After several tries to get me aboard, the rescue people on the ski decided that I should just hang onto the ski, and they would pull me back to shore. "The bubbles will feel just like a Jacuzzi," they said. They were wrong. The bubbles from the motor cut into me like knives. And they sent my shorts down to my ankles. I shouted for them to stop.

By this time, a rescue boat was in the water. Rescuers pulled George into the boat with no problem. It took four people to pull me in the boat. All the time, I was so glad to be rescued, but worried about my immodest appearance. Fortunately, one of the rescuers was a woman. She shielded me with a blanket and helped me get my sodden clothes back where they belonged. The

boat carried us to shore, where we were put in the ambulance.

George told the rescue people that there were two more people in the water and suggested that he go back out with them to show them where we first went down. The rescuers declined and said they would search for the other two. George and I were taken to a hospital. George was released immediately. I stayed in the hospital for three days with hypoxia (oxygen deficiency) and water in my lungs. I didn't realize that a person could drown even after being taken out of the water.

While I was in the hospital, I learned that rescue personnel had found Gus's body. I've heard that he died of a heart attack, but don't know anything official. They saw nothing of little Mike. Days later, Mike's body was found floating in the bay. He didn't have on a life preserver. Either it had slipped off him, or he had taken it off. We'll never know. 

***Postscript:** I first learned of this tragedy on the evening news last summer. When I turned on the TV, the first thing I saw was Judy being loaded into the ambulance. I recognized her because she used to live next door to me. I have talked to her about this mishap many times since then. I knew not only Judy and her son, but Gus as well. Judy says she has learned a lot from this experience. She carries the emotional scars as well as the physical ones. Her breathing has never been normal since. She says she has trouble breathing, even after little physical effort—something she never had before. Her son and she did end up buying a boat, since they both love the bay and fishing. However, the boat they bought is a 23-footer, with freeboard up to their waists. Never again will Judy go into the bay in a small boat that could be swamped.*

Judy is still amazed that no one could see or hear them in the water. A tanker passed close by them, airplanes flew over low, and boats were passing by. She says she never felt as invisible as she did that day. She is working on developing a

kit for boaters to attach to their life vests that would have all the things necessary to help them if they go into the water, such as flares, line, lights, and sunscreen. And Judy says that no one goes in her boat unless they are wearing a life jacket that fits.—Ed.

The larger boat in the foreground, with a deep freeboard, is more capable of withstanding wakes from passing boats than the smaller boat in the background. The chances of the smaller boat being swamped are far greater.

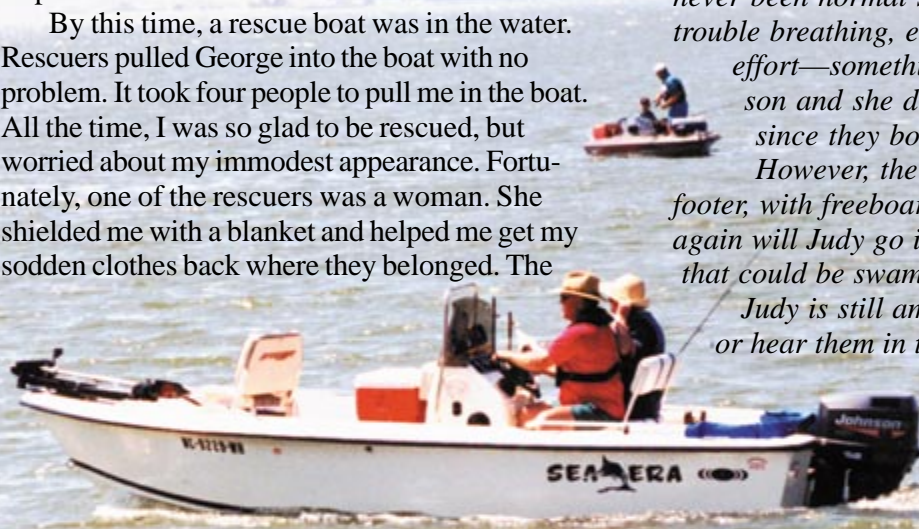


Photo by Cassandra R. Albert